

4.1 What is the purpose of this chapter? This chapter provides the Service's policy governing the management of wildlife observation programs on units of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). In an effort to avoid redundancy, we have placed critical information and guidance for all wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation) in 605 FW 1. Read 605 FW 1 with this chapter for complete information for planning and implementation purposes.

4.2 What is the scope of this chapter? The policies contained in this chapter apply to recreational wildlife observation programs within the Refuge System. See 605 FW 1 and other chapters and regulations governing policies, guidelines, and procedures for additional information.

4.3 What is our policy regarding wildlife observation in the Refuge System?

A. The overarching goal of our wildlife-dependent recreation policy is to enhance opportunities and access to quality visitor experiences on refuges and to manage the refuge to conserve fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats (see 605 FW 1.6).

B. Wildlife observation is an appropriate use of the Refuge System when compatible. It is also a priority general public use of the Refuge System and should receive enhanced consideration over nonpriority uses. We strongly encourage refuge managers to provide visitors with quality wildlife observation opportunities when compatible. Wildlife observation programs can promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on all lands and waters in the Refuge System. We encourage refuge staff to develop and take full advantage of opportunities to work with other partners who have an interest in helping us promote quality wildlife observation programs on refuges.

4.4 What are the guiding principles of the Refuge System's wildlife observation program? The guiding principles of the System's wildlife observation programs are to:

A. Provide safe, enjoyable, and accessible wildlife viewing opportunities and facilities.

B. Promote visitor understanding of, and increase visitor appreciation for, America's natural resources.

C. Provide opportunities for quality recreational and educational experiences consistent with criteria describing quality found in 605 FW 1.6.

D. Minimize conflicts with visitors participating in other compatible wildlife-dependent recreation activities.

4.5 What authorities allow us to support wildlife observation in the Refuge System? See 605 FW 1.3 for laws and Executive orders that govern wildlife observation in the Refuge System.

4.6 How do we foster visitor stewardship in our wildlife observation programs? Refuge managers provide opportunities for visitors to observe wildlife, which can instill an appreciation for the value of and need for fish and wildlife habitat conservation. Refuges provide enhanced opportunities to view wildlife in their natural habitat by providing observation trails, platforms, viewing equipment, brochures, interpreters, viewing areas, and tour routes. Refuge managers should seek to develop partnerships with organizations that promote wildlife observation and that value wildlife resources. We encourage refuge managers to design local hands-on activities that inspire participants to become involved in habitat restoration and other outreach programs. These opportunities foster a sense of stewardship for the Refuge System, wildlife, and habitat resources through direct experience.

4.7 What are some examples of tools we can use to support our wildlife observation programs? Refuge managers should consider the following examples of tools as guidelines and continually use their creativity and ingenuity when providing opportunities that highlight the uniqueness of a particular refuge.

A. Developed Observation Sites. Developing specific areas for visitors to view wildlife enhances wildlife observation and limits the disturbance to wildlife and habitat. During the planning process, refuge managers should consider constructing viewing areas at sites less sensitive to the impacts of visitors. Developed observation sites provide a centralized area for visitors to receive information and education needed to produce a safe, quality experience. Examples of such developments include butterfly gardens, observation trails, boardwalks in wet areas, observation towers and platforms, blinds, vehicle pullouts, information kiosks, identification signs, and automobile tour routes. Refuge managers must weigh the benefits of wildlife observation enhancements with any changes in existing habitat as well as any potential harm to wildlife's life history requirements. If a potential facility modification for people with disabilities would cause harm to the setting's appearance, environmental features, or historic character, we will make efforts to allow alternative access.

B. Information. Information distribution is invaluable as a management tool as well as a means to promote wildlife observation opportunities. Information,

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distributed through various media, should communicate available wildlife observation opportunities, best viewing times, techniques that emphasize respect for wildlife by minimizing visitor impacts on wildlife, access point information, viewer etiquette, regulations, restrictions, management concerns, and management objectives. Examples of ways to provide information include bird/plant/mammal check lists, brochures, maps, books, Internet, CD-ROMs, DVDs, Watchable Wildlife recreation symbols, wildlife viewing guides, movies, slide shows, talks, guided walks, staffed information desks, roving interpreters, formal environmental education classes, teacher workshops, and interpretive exhibits. Distributing information is a way to direct visitor use to appropriate areas; provide managers with the opportunity to present the refuge, Refuge System, and Service messages to visitors; and foster visitor appreciation and stewardship. See 605 FW 7, Interpretation, for guidance on interpretive programs.

Directives Management to submit the required information to the Office of Management and Budget for approval. Approved surveys can be implemented by contract through universities or private companies.

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C. Specialized Equipment. In cases where direct wildlife viewing would be detrimental to sensitive species or habitats, refuge managers may develop facilities that provide remote viewing opportunities. Refuge managers may, for example, set up spotting scopes to provide remote viewing opportunities, offer audio opportunities for visitors to help identify wildlife they may not be able to see, and show videos during the optimum viewing seasons. Pictures from remote cameras linked with the Refuge System's electronic field trip programs and long-distance environmental learning projects can highlight wildlife management and refuge purpose(s). Photographs incorporated into interpretive signs show visitors wildlife and habitats they may encounter. We should consider specialized equipment as supplements to and not replacements for direct viewing opportunities. The refuge manager should consider using these techniques to provide opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable.

4.8 What tools can we use to evaluate and monitor wildlife observation programs?

A. Refuge managers must monitor and evaluate their wildlife observation programs regularly. Refuge managers should evaluate both the quality of the experience and the effects of the activity on refuge resources. A wide variety of evaluation and monitoring tools exist, including talking to and asking visitors how they rate their viewing experience, conducting an approved customer satisfaction survey, and monitoring wildlife behavior and habitat response near observation areas.

B. If a refuge manager decides to create a new survey to evaluate the visitor's experience on a specific refuge, he or she must follow approved information collection procedures and work with the Division of Policy and